



# The Religious Campaign for Wilderness

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New Mexico Wilderness Advisory Statement

## Otero Mesa Advisory Statement on Wilderness

A Call to the Churches and Religious  
Institutions of New Mexico to Reflect on a  
Forgotten Understanding of Wilderness

On the plains alongside Otero Mesa  
Otero Mesa County  
October 16-19, 2003



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# Introduction

In December, 2002 representatives of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance approached the newly organized Religious Campaign for Wilderness during a conference in Albuquerque and discussed the possibility of cooperating to articulate the spiritual values of the Otero Mesa wild area.



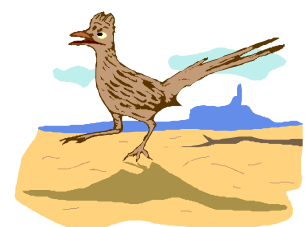
Ten months later, during the weekend of October 17-19, 2003, representatives from a coalition of New Mexico's churches and religious institutions assembled on the edge of Otero Mesa to discern and recover a sense of the spiritual values of wilderness.

As a result of three-days of exploration, reflection and discussion, we concluded that the people of New Mexico need wilderness to heal the emptiness and spiritual insensitivity which results from spirits degraded by consumerism, individualism and rampant materialism. As society embraces technological innovation and unbridled commercialism, people become distant from the primal lessons of life. Yet wilderness reconnects people back to basic principles and the reality of a Creator-God. It awakens awareness to questions of life and death, spiritual formation, right relationships and religious values. It can even help shape our lives and the systems of society so that they integrate with the demands of God and creation.

From our experience, therefore, we declare that the spiritual lessons of wilderness are so many and so abundant, that they transcend our ability to articulate their scope. Nevertheless we offer the following statement as a beginning assessment of wilderness and its generic spiritual values. We submit this for your consideration and review.

Please reflect upon this statement with other clergy and members of your group. We would appreciate your comments and insights. Our advisory statement follows.

Greta Balderama,  
Las Cruces, NM  
For The Reflection Team





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## The Spiritual Values of Otero Mesa

*The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork. (Psalm 19:1)*

*But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee: Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee: and the fishes of the sea shall declare unto thee. Who knoweth not in all these that the hand of the Lord hath wrought this? (Job 12:7-9)*

*Since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities -- his eternal power and divine nature -- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.  
(Romans 1:20)*

*We [New Mexico's Native people] do not destroy the harmony of nature. To us this is beauty. We care for and nurture our environment, trying to be all-forgiving like Mother Earth. We are trustees of our environment. This gives us union with all existence, all the creatures which live in the world: wild animals, little crawling things, even men. (San Ildefonso Pueblo, New Mexico)*

DAVID, THE PSALMIST, SANG OF THE HEAVENS DECLARING THE GLORY OF GOD. The prophet Job affirmed lessons from the earth and its creatures. The prophet Isaiah declared that the condition of the land reflected the state of human society.

WHEN THE APOSTLE PAUL SENT HIS EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS he wrote, "Since the creation of the world the invisible things of him are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made." Through this statement he taught that the unseen things of the Creator may be known from His creation.

THE PUEBLO PEOPLE OF NEW MEXICO, along with other Native peoples, see all of nature as a powerful witness of the Creator.

THROUGHOUT THE WORLD'S GREAT FAITH TRADITIONS, there is a teaching that wilderness holds essential lessons about spirituality, religious understanding, and right livelihood. This is not just poetic idealism. In our own time in wilderness we have experienced an outpouring of insights and sensed the intensity and immensity of the silent witness of wilderness.



Wilderness, more than any other place, offers opportunities to discern qualities of our Creator without defilement or defacement.

In our reflection on wild places, we have found that places which are protected from human development preserve a uniquely vivid testimony of their Creator, and so are particularly able to convey the spiritual lessons which God intended creation to reflect.

The spiritual values of wilderness have a depth that is largely unarticulated but which holds great potential for further development.

We list here ten beginning spiritual values which we have observed from our time of prayer, reflection and discussion on and around Otero Mesa:

- \* Wilderness offers inspiration. When we become quiet, we can feel a stillness in nature which engenders stillness in ourselves. This stillness leads to inspiration. Loneliness results when we do not turn to God. Wilderness then becomes thorns and thistles. With God, stillness is fulfilling; without God it can be dry, empty, barren.
- \* Wilderness is a teacher of humility. Under the open sky, untrammled desert seems vast and humans small. We learn that we are not in control. Wilderness reveals our insignificance in the face of the cosmos; it reminds us how large God is because God is the Creator. This leads us naturally to thanksgiving, worship and prayer.
- \* Wilderness is a vision of the original world preserved. In wild places we see the world connected and integrated. Free of alteration or development, we gain a vision of the original integrity and interdependence, of complementarity and synergy. In wilderness every part of creation plays a role and serves the other parts. Everything has a place. This intricate design becomes an example for human society on how to structure our lives.
- \* Wilderness teaches us how to build. A key lesson of wilderness is that we must learn to build with creation and not against creation. We must integrate our lives with the ecosystem of the planet and with the Spirit of its Creator. Therefore we need wilderness to teach us how to live, especially because unsustainable technologies are increasing exponentially and we are unsure of our direction as a people and a planet.
- \* Wilderness helps us know ourselves. The prophets went to wilderness with purpose and reason. In solitude they encountered a Spirit and a system which soars beyond human wisdom. As we go in solitude and reflection, we can learn to know ourselves. We can learn to hear the small voice of God within ourselves. This leads to humility and a deeper humanity.
- \* Wilderness cultivates spiritual discernment. While wilderness is not the only place where one can find deep inspiration and truth, in wilderness there are fewer human distractions. With intentionality one can find deeper concentration uninhibited by the speed and stress of modern society. This is the traditional spiritual role of wilderness. Its value is that it helps one join head, heart and hands together.
- \* Wilderness encourages moral perception and strength. The physical demands of wilderness lead to stamina, determination and physical health. The demands of wilderness involve alertness and awareness surroundings. The spiritual demands of wilderness allow mental of one's one with



prayer and intentionality to rise into awareness of how the spiritual and physical interpenetrate. This clarifies our vision and brings the essential lessons of life into sharper focus. For this reason Jesus found in wilderness a place of testing.

- \* Wilderness holds spiritual lessons. Christian, Jewish and Native traditions agree that in wilderness we learn about ourselves, about life and its deeper meanings, about God and spiritual formation. For Jesus wilderness was a spiritual test. For the Hebrew prophets, wilderness was a place of stillness and discernment. For Native peoples wilderness has been a bible, a source of learning as well as a storehouse of sustenance. For everyone wilderness is can be a framework for understanding creation as a Book of Wisdom.
- \* Wilderness teaches community and communion. In wilderness we sense our interior connection to the cosmos. All creatures and all creation share a common source in the same Creator. Because we are part of the earth and human health requires the processes of the planet to be healthy for our bodies to be healthy, we learn to respect the air, water, land and sun as servants of God. This teaches community and connection with the land as a horizontal unity. Because we are inwardly tied to the Creator and through His life all creation, we learn of communion as a vertical unity.
- \* Wilderness is an organic spiritual test. In wilderness everything fits together. This establishes both a model and a test for human society. If we would obey the commandments, we would create in harmony with the land and avoid the terrible problems humanity faces in global warming, toxic taints, species extermination, and other issues. Wilderness shows that submission to God leads to service to creation.



# Reflection



WE HAVE SEEN THAT THE SPIRITUAL VALUES OF WILDERNESS ARE MORE NUMEROUS than we can list. Although we find these values beyond enumeration, we recognize them in their many forms as gifts and blessings from our Creator which help us to appreciate the life we receive from God.

In wilderness we discern a system so vast, so diverse, and so far beyond human construction, that we are humbled by its immensity. All human technology and invention pale before the grandness and the wisdom of the divine plan embedded before us within the earth.

Wilderness, more than any other place, offers opportunities to see the qualities of our Creator without defilement or defacement. This teaches us how the world works. This should instruct us in how to build and integrate human society so that it integrates with the ecosystem of the planet.

In wilderness we awaken our feelings to the pulses of life, to the ebb and flow of cycles, to the rhythms and songs of creation. Here we discern our Maker reflected. When we are in remembrance of our Creator, we are uplifted and creation itself then provides inspiration for our minds, healing for our spirits, and release from incorrect and false notions.

Appreciation of wilderness cannot be rushed. There is a reciprocal relationship in wild places, one that invites prayer, reflection and wonder, and that gives back in proportion to our capacity to appreciate, enjoy and find thanksgiving for the Lord's untrammelled earth. For this reason wilderness becomes an open invitation to abundant life.

Preserving wild places and protecting wilderness are vital to these gifts. The gifts of wilderness to our minds, to our bodies and to our souls are too vast for us to absorb quickly.

Let us then go slow then with our tendency to rush into development and use of our remaining wild lands. Wilderness may well hold lessons to questions we have not yet learned how to ask.



# An Invitation to the Churches of New Mexico

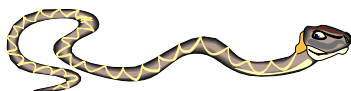
We are inspired to invite you, the clergy and religious leaders of New Mexico, to reflect on the spiritual values of wilderness. We invite you to join with us and learn to see through wilderness and there discern God's eternal invitation to behold His face in creation. To appreciate this invitation:

- o Take time and go out into wilderness. Only through intentionality can we appreciate and then protect wilderness.
- o Love what God loves. As God loved the world that He sent His only begotten son, so let us enter into a love for what God loves. Love for wilderness leads to wilderness conservation and the creation of additional wild places.
- o Help recover a lost wilderness heritage. We need to see the many values which wilderness holds for a stronger and more vigorous faith and Christian practice. Without the healing influence which wilderness exerts, our faith grows weak in the face of the assaults which secular society brings to the vigor of a whole Christianity.
- o Slow down. The artificial pace and space of society may accelerate the advance of technology, but it dulls the human spirit. The faster we go, the less we perceive, particularly of the spiritual impulses of wilderness. We need to decrease our time in artificial spaces at hurried paces and increase our time in the place of wilderness.
- o Encourage respect for wilderness. Without deliberate efforts at education – spiritual, psychological and ecological, we cannot expand wilderness nor protect our present wild places from encroachment and development.
- o Encourage discussion regarding the religious reasons for saving New Mexico's unprotected wild areas. While wilderness is a clear and reoccurring theme in Scripture, most modern churches have forgotten this legacy so that it is no longer a theme in church teaching or preaching.
- o Acknowledge a mandate from God to set aside additional new wilderness. As people of faith, we find an abundance of spiritual and social values in wilderness.
- o Do not diminish, damage, devalue or desecrate our wilderness heritage. As we preserve wilderness, we protect the future of God's witness through creation. Churches and synagogues must stand for the integrity of creation. The way each person treats creation determines the way he or she will one day face the day of Judgement (Rev. 11:18).



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### Endorsement



I have read the foregoing statement and wish to support its message and its call for the people of New Mexico and their religious institutions to protect Otero Mesa and New Mexico's other remaining wilderness lands. This is my prayer.

### Sign Below to Save Otero Mesa

Please sign your full name, the church, synagogue, tribe or institution with which you are associated (for identification purposes), and the town or city where you live. Thank you.

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